Clausewitz for Complex Warfare

by

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Abstract

Contemporary interpretations of complex warfare are neither holistic nor precise enough to make a fundamental distinction in strategy – what is static and what is dynamic in a given operational situation? This paper interprets Clausewitz to focus on the unchanging nature and changing character of war, highlighting the importance of discerning both of these aspects to understanding complex warfare. Without a baseline for "the given," fundamental questions about the causes and context of conflict are not likely to be asked. As a result, plans and operations may produce tactical victories without contributing to desired strategic effects. Currently, three intellectual impediments inhibit our understanding of the nature of war: (1) misapplying Clausewitz' key concepts of the Trinity; (2) viewing conflict along a uni-dimensional "spectrum of conflict"; and (3) using false dichotomies. These misinterpretations generate imprecise terms and partial concepts that do not adequately address why warfare occurs or capture its changing character in local context. We can overcome these impediments and develop strategic judgment with two basic changes in the way we use Clausewitzian ideas. First, the Trinity should be used to model the nature not just the character of war. This would direct strategists toward the investigation of motives and causes, and lead planners to design those factors into operations rather than assume them away. Second, precise terms with defined opposites should be used. Sharp distinctions, flexibly employed to ascertain what is changing from what is not, could help specify local factors such as causes, key actors, relationships, all key to establishing effective operational priorities.

It is axiomatic that warfare requires its participants to adapt. But strategists and practitioners need to go further, striving to anticipate emerging challenges in war. To begin to do this, one of our first questions ought to be, what has not changed about warfare—that is, what do we generally assume as a "given" for strategy and planning? Answering this basic question involves more than deriving clear objectives from goals and preparing for top-down changes of them…these aspects are not to be taken for granted either. Fundamentally, the preparation of executable strategies demands sound assumptions about the nature of war. Without a reasonable baseline about the essence of warfare, the strategy-making process can default to ad hoc, case-by-case judgments about how to evaluate complex warfare.

The term "complex warfare" offered here refers to multi-layered conflicts among state and/or non-state actors pursuing diverse objectives with traditional and new technologies. The multi-layered aspect describes an array of competitive and cooperative affiliations among groups throughout society, including but not limited to the following: military, police, media, militias, insurgents, terrorists, ethnic groups, family networks, contractors, criminals, national and local governments, international organizations, and businesses. Diversity of objectives is also an important feature because the typically assumed basis for alliance, that of a

common threat, is not necessarily valid in complex warfare. Differences in values and interests can be exchanged in a cooperative bargain even if temporary, just as unresolved differences promote illegitimate competition and violent conflict.

Current examples of complex warfare include US-led post-invasion coalition operations in Afghanistan (since 2001) and Iraq (since 2003), the still smoldering Israel-Hamas-Hezbollah conflict of July-August 2006, and counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Each of these examples involve a variety of armed groups, types and scope of goals, and levels and methods of violence that can suddenly erupt, abate, and reignite due to persistent social instability.

From the standpoint of making *strategy*, these cases present operational environments where competitors blend high/low tech, direct/indirect *ways* and *means* to achieve desired *ends*. The combination of outcomes (ends), resources (means) and approaches (ways) in strategy includes physical and psychological aspects. Rationality itself can be relative, as diverse cultures exhibit different preference structures. So we need to explore and specify values and perceptions of interest, rather than assume them as being the same as our own. This effort requires a balanced analytic starting point to protect the process of strategy-making from devolving into inaccurate or contrived assessments. If we assume too much has changed--via high-tech defense transformation, for instance--then we tend to overlook resilient traditions that can matter, such as tribal loyalties, local militias, and other human networks. But underestimating the advantages of rapid communications and precise munitions also can be costly, as armed groups have proven themselves adept at adapting to diffuse advances in weaponry and information technology. So we need to begin with holistic perspectives.

Current interpretations of warfare offer plenty of broad frameworks, but they are not holistic enough. Arguments range from the potential of operational domains, such as space and cyberspace, to emerging forms of "Fourth-Generation Warfare."[1] New domain arguments tend to be clearer about new technological capabilities then in connecting them to broader desired effects and political goals. Warfare-type arguments generally present blends of old and new capabilities as if tactics and strategies change in historical shifts to the next gear, or phase. Both approaches are limited to the extent they deal with how, but not why, war is waged. Other perspectives on warfare distinguish among observed characteristics of war, such as unconventional, asymmetrical, irregular, and various hybrids thereof. These viewpoints would be sufficiently holistic if they described a full dimension or range of variation. Whether these interpretations of warfare involve domains or characteristics, they can help us fathom constants from variables -- if we seek both aspects. Without such inquiry, our understanding of war is incomplete, which can lead to overdependence on familiar factors, from favored weapons and intelligence collection platforms to predicted patterns of behavior. For a more complete approach, we need to explore classic, arguably unchanging, elements of warfare.

Relevance

With a single assumption, Clausewitz's On War remains relevant as a starting point to understand warfare today. The assumption is that strategists including extremists[2] attempt to create processes that are rational, although they may be cloaked by deception. A Clausewitzian approach to war is one that subordinates the whole business as an instrument of policy, not as an end in itself, in an attempt to link ends, ways and means across strategic, operational and tactical levels. This premise seems valid – even societies where warfare is a way of life maintain codes of behavior that preserve the political order, such as *Pashtunwali.*

A danger in assuming the existence of rationality in war is that we might not recognize it in contexts other than our own. In other cultures, common political objectives may exist among layers of social norms yet unpeeled by unaware strategists looking for familiarly connected systems. So we must look for relative

rationality based on other value preferences. Bing West in The Strongest Tribe, , for instance, describes how US leaders overlooked the guerrilla reality of war in summer 2003 Iraq and failed to recognize the existence of disparate political objectives among insurgent groups. Intelligence is neither perfectly perceived and accurate nor complete, so when we match tasks to missions in support of objectives, we make must assumptions about what is known and unknown, likely and improbable, static or dynamic, and for how long. This takes judgment, a developed quality on which Clausewitz placed a premium due to his high regard and healthy skepticism of the role of intelligence:

[Intelligence is the] foundation of all our plans and actions…[a] great part of the information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part is false, and by far the greatest part somewhat doubtful. What is required of an officer in this case is a certain power of discrimination, which only knowledge of men and things and good judgment can give.[3]

As in this ability to discriminate relevant from irrelevant information in ambiguous situations, the fundamental questions of strategy concern what to regard as a "given" and what to treat as changing.

Today is it is more often Sun Tzu than Clausewitz whose wisdom is invoked for asymmetric nuances and subtle stratagems. But Sun Tzu focused on asserting conclusions. Clausewitz is the first strategist who demonstrated how thinking theoretically can help understand the human complexity of war.[4] With the important caveat of theory being grounded in practical experience, Clausewitz regarded the study of war as a tool to school the mind to develop judgment, not to prescribe particular procedures. While Sun Tzu may enjoy more captioning due to its brevity and profound simplicity, the Master's cogency is limited by its aphoristic tautologies and civil war context. Clausewitz's historical context, the dawn of expanded state warfare, can be misapplied as well[5] but at least we have more developed theoretical constructs to work with. If the worst we can do with Sun Tzu is to misapply a truism, what we should seek to avoid with Clausewitz is to misrepresent a theoretical relationship. This is an easy offense to commit because digesting Clausewitz demands multiple, reflective readings.

Much of the intellectual power of Clausewitzian thought lies in the use of dialectical terms, such as absolute vs. real war, offense vs. defense, and tactical vs. strategic. Perhaps because reality is often perceived as a blend of opposites, such distinctions provide a way to compare nuanced differences and similarities, relative change and absence of change. It can be the beginning of active thinking with flexible concepts, rather than the end of it with unexamined doctrinal applications. Admittedly a dense read, Clausewitz goes beyond simple syllogisms to be followed for success. Like Sun Tzu, we encounter ideas drawn from experience and observation, but we also enter a systematic philosophical inquiry that seeks to comprehensively understand the phenomenon of war.

Impediments

What inhibits us from understanding the nature of war? From a Clausewitzian perspective, there appear to be three major impediments today: (1) misapplying Clausewitz' key concepts of the Trinity; (2) viewing conflict along a uni-dimensional "spectrum of conflict"; and (3) using false dichotomies.

Clausewitz's Trinity includes distinctions that are important to his holistic conceptualization of war. First is the difference between the nature of war and the character (*kind* in this translation) of war:

> Wars must vary with the nature of their motives and of the situation which gives rise to them. The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and

the most comprehensive.

Clausewitz conceptualized the nature of war as a holistic, unchanging essence, while referring to the kind of war (*character*) as changes that comprise distinctive realities of each case. We in fact apply such dualism today at the campaign, operational, and tactical levels of war when evaluating what is likely to remain constant and what is apt to vary across time. But we pay less attention to it ahead of time if we focus on changes, such as how to adapt weapons system technologies to "new" threats. Classic political-military theorists tended to focus on human elements of warfare, which enabled them to focus on war's more enduring attributes (except for those who believe the nature of mankind has changed). War defined by Clausewitz is broadly defined as "an act of force intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will."[6] Often today, however, the "nature" of war is presented as something that has changed, followed by a clarion call for a new understanding of warfare. If the nature of war itself can be altered by changes in the character of war, whether those are transformational or incremental, then we would expect to see definitions of "nature" and "character" of war. But this distinction too often seems to be the preserve of historians. The "paradoxical Trinity,"[7] arguably Clausewitz's overarching concept of relationships about the nature of war, was intended to be a holistic tool that allowed for connected analysis, not disaggregated description. Several other Clausewitzian concepts are also frequently taken out of theoretical context, such as Center of Gravity ("the hub of all power and movement") which is often misinterpreted as a source of strength.

Besides for the purpose of preserving balanced distinctions, we need broad concepts to capture the changing character of warfare. But any broad concept will not necessarily do. The often cited "spectrum of conflict" is an example of a clung-to concept that promotes the over-simple idea that conflict ranges from the easy-to-do to the hard-to-do, as if the skills required on one end of the spectrum were adequate for conflict at the other end. As a Jominian[8] descriptor of the range of military operations and the need for diverse capabilities, the spectrum may work fine. But it is limited as a way to depict complex conflict. Even if we acknowledge that the left side of the spectrum (humanitarian operations, irregular warfare, etc.) is more difficult to understand and wage than the right side of the spectrum (general war, regular war, etc.), a spectrum of conflict restricts itself to one-dimensional variation. It can reinforce a false sense of having to commit fewer resources on the left end, and more on the right end without regard to other factors such as desired effects, assumed risks, and time. More useful constructs for strategy tend to be more complicated, such as the OODA loop,[9] thoughtful versions of "the Surge,"[10] or a comprehensive counterinsurgency approach to Somali instability.[11] The spectrum of conflict also does not promote the notion that there are other relationships which describe the unchanging nature of warfare that can be vital to operational success.

The third mental blockage to realizing the benefits of a Clausewitzian approach is the use of false dichotomies. When we use opposite concepts, we are framing alternatives as if degrees of variation exist between those concepts. But we often encounter catch-all concepts that do not provide more precision. This may be common during times of transformative change—the Napoleonic Revolution in Clausewitz's day and globalization in ours, for instance. Clausewitz's key concepts (real – ideal, limited-unlimited war, action – inaction, etc.) were propounded through dialectical reasoning, which evaluates a situation as an outcome of opposites: thesis + antithesis=synthesis.[12]

We routinely use concepts that lack any dialectical precision. Admittedly, ambiguity in complex warfare is unavoidable for various historic, political and cultural reasons--which groups think and behave in which ways under what conditions, for instance? But we still need concepts that can help us divine different situations. Terms with analytic potential such as "irregular warfare," "special operations forces," and "unconventional warfare" have not yet developed with a logic that enables clear comparison. We don't often see Irregular Warfare used in a manner that it is distinct from regular warfare, but rather, presented as somehow opposite

from “traditional” warfare. As a definition, Irregular Warfare seems to have been constructed by committee, collecting under its umbrella loosely common “indirect methods” and “non-traditional means” without even defining what “regular” warfare is. Even “special operations” is often compared to “conventional forces” rather than “general purpose forces.” Similarly, unconventional warfare or forces (“by, with, or through”) is not distinguished from conventional warfare or forces -- the latter is defined as “non-nuclear” or “other-than-special operations forces.”

Different service traditions and competition for defense acquisition projects may perpetuate sloppy distinctions that hinder joint and interagency communication. Add to this a bureaucratic imperative for consensus, and we get core definitions that mean different things to different organizations. If we have to describe a multitude of related terms to get to the meaning of one, then what is the value-added of these terms, particularly for strategy, plans and operations?

Implications

Such distinctions are not merely academic. Terms have a way of growing into operational concepts. Usually this is done within existing missions via the application of principles, tenets, and identity-reinforcing mandates, informed by experience. Two examples that illustrate the interplay of theory and practice are Low Intensity Conflict and Special Forces doctrine. Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) is a term that arose among policy makers to describe conflicts that they regarded as somehow falling short of war. Practitioners still criticize the dangerous assumption that local conflicts are neither intense nor complex. Operators developed “LIC imperatives” (later to become special operations forces imperatives and “truths”) and related them to the principles of war and various tenets, such as the AirLand Battle. These served as a foundation for a larger LIC concept of operations. As humanitarian operations expanded to include more non-military aspects, LIC was replaced in policy circles by a broader term, “Operations Other Than War.” US Army Special Forces doctrine was also subjected to the principles of war, certain tenets, and its own imperatives, and shown to be compatible with Army Operations doctrine. Just as in the case of LIC, the initial concept was too narrow for increasingly complex operations, so a broader term emerged. A recent addition to US Army doctrine, Stability Operations,[13] has great potential to be used precisely because it addresses grievances and other causes and motivations of *in*stability.

Imprecise terms such as Irregular Warfare (IW) can complicate more than clarify complex missions. They need to be scrutinized for added value, something beyond a macro-acronym for existing missions. For instance, IW currently claims within its purview all the following missions, partly or wholly: Foreign Internal Defense; Counterinsurgency; Counterterrorism; Unconventional Warfare; Psychological Operations; Information Operations; Security, Stability, Security, Transition, Reconstruction; Civil Military Operations; Counterintelligence; and Law Enforcement. It remains to be seen whether a term without a defined opposite can help resolve organizational issues, such as whether to organize IW with respect to “operational themes”[14] or as a separate bureaucratic directorate, or enhance mission capabilities. Executable missions and functions do overlap, one reason planners and operators need commonly accepted, precise terms to grasp real issues, such as who is doing what, how, and why. Joint doctrinal strategy using terms such as “ends,” “ways” and “means” and involving recognizable missions seems more useful for analysis than a deliberately vague umbrella term.

One way to precision-grind ambiguous terms just a bit is to define them as distinct from their opposites (regular warfare, in the case of IW). To avoid making the “spectrum of war” mistake of uni-dimensionality, definitional opposites can include multiple variables. One possible definition of regular warfare that confines itself to the use of violence (leaving information operations, for instance, as an open issue with respect to “warfare”) but includes four dimensions of variation could be the following: “the use of violence by military

forces for a purpose identified by the state, by using orthodox or conventional approaches to warfare." At the cost of entering definitional debates over dimensions of change (use of violence v. non-use of violence, military forces v. non-military forces, purpose identified by state v. purpose not identified by state, orthodox v. unorthodox, conventional v. unconventional), we can realize the benefit of IW as a more useful concept. How so? [15]

At least knowing what IW is *not* could animate a higher fidelity discussion about how to plan for, organize and execute complex warfare. Examples include: organizational relationships (do we organize an Information Operations Numbered Air Force, a Combat Advisor Corps, or Asymmetric Warfare Wing, or integrate new capabilities across existing units?); synergistic capabilities (are desired effects best achieved with existing blends of forces, or new combinations of high/low tech, direct/indirect, coalition/indigenous capabilities?) ; and combinations of otherwise separated objectives (are diplomatic, informational, military, economic and social outcomes sufficiently fused?).

Because the details of complex operations have to be at coordinated, synchronized, or integrated to achieve the ends of strategy, we need a common understanding of complicated concepts. A recent JFCOM directive to halt the use of ambiguous interpretations of "effects-based operations" reflects its commander's strong desire to use words that communicate clearly.[16]

Clarity in communication may not have been Clausewitz's forte, insofar as we can discern it in his translated, unfinished work. However, with two requirements, we can still realize the benefits of his approach in a variety of processes, whether they happen to be described as effects-based operations, network-centric warfare, strategy-to-tasks, the military decision-making process, or an operations order.

First, we need holistic concepts that enable us to consider both the unchanging nature and changing character of war. The Trinity's modeling of the nature of war (the interplay of passion, uncertainty, and reason) is not only about what is constant, but also about *why* it is constant. This leads us to investigate motives and causes. Therefore we are more likely to design statics and dynamics of any situation into strategy, rather than assume it away. Second, we need precise terms. Dialectical terms with defined opposites are useful as an intellectual tool to recognizing nuanced differences in ambiguous situations. Effects-based operations, for instance, is an analytically useful concept as long as we can specify what non-effects based operations look like. Reality will likely be a blend of all sets of opposite tendencies, but without knowing what the extremes are, it is difficult to ascertain degrees of difference. It all would look like the same mushy soup, even if we learn to eat it patiently with a knife. But sharp distinctions, flexibly employed to ascertain the nature and characteristics of war, can help us specify and think through important factors such as causes, relationships and priorities in war. Thus armed with a more complete Clausewitz than sometimes seems in vogue, we can develop better judgment and improved strategy for complex warfare.

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[1] Thomas X. Hammes, The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century (St Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004).

[2] For insights into a jihadist's rationality, see Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (NY: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[3] Caleb Carr, The Book of War (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 319.

[4] Peter Paret. *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) p. 108.

[5] Clausewitz's conception of entities that waged war was not confined to the state, but included other armed groups: : "The semi barbarous Tartars, the republics of antiquity, the feudal lords and trading cities of the Middle Ages, eighteenth-century kings and the rulers and peoples of the nineteenth century—all conducted war in their own particular way, using different methods and pursuing different aims." On War , Howard and Paret, p. 586.

[6] Howard and Paret, p. 75

[7] "War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total [phenomenon] its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone."

[8] Antoine Henri Jomini, The Art of War (Greenwood, CN: Westport Press, 1978), originally published in 1862. By "Jominian" I mean conceptually over- simple, such as Jomini's perspective on war and strategy. He saw war in terms of how a military organizes itself to conduct it ; he regarded strategy as "the art of making war upon the map"—p. 62.

[9] John Boyd's Observe-Orient-Decide-Act loop, for instance, integrates factors such as the complex variety of information, uncertainty, implicit decision making logic, and constant unfolding interaction with the environment for the purpose of continually creating competitive advantages. For an extensive analysis and discussion, see Frans P.B. Osinga, Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[10] Fernando Martinez Lujan's "Plan B" solution is a good example of going beyond simplistic characterization of "the surge" as a single-word strategy. Lujan argues for a generational strategy based on smaller-embedded forces and long-term institution building, a massive mobilization of talent from both civilian and military society to engage with local institutions across a broad front, and increased focus on information warfare and the role of public opinion. See Fernando Martinez Luján, "Plan B in Iraq: Beyond the Surge: Keeping the Military Relevant in an Asymmetric World", *Policy Directions Part I,*(2007): 49.

[11] UN Resolution 1846 recognizes the need for a broad strategy to counter piracy: "Emphasizing that peace and stability within Somalia, the strengthening of State institutions, economic and social development and respect for human rights and the rule of law are necessary to create the conditions for a full eradication of piracy and armed robbery at sea off the coast of Somalia…"

[12] The central assumption of dialectical reasoning is that reality is taken to be a blend of opposites. Tension is attributed to the opposite concepts and an intellectual framework, such as the Trinity, is constructed to resolve those forces.

[13] Stability Operations in an Era of Persistent Conflict, draft FM 3-07 (Washington, DC: US Army, 1 June 2008). Stability Operations is seen as one component of full spectrum operations (the other two being Offense and Defense).

[14] Operational themes across a spectrum of conflict are meant to be flexible enough to convey the character of the operation to operators conducting lines of effects.

[15]The best definition is that of James Kiras, whose multiple-perspective definition includes the different purposes for which violence is used, the presence of root grievances, and a relative lack of resources and capabilities available compared to regular adversaries: James D. Kiras, Irregular Warfare in David Jordan, James D. Kiras, David J. Lonsdale, Ian Speller, Christopher Tuck and C. Dale Walton, Understanding Modern Warfare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008),pp. 225-291. Irregular warfare is defined as "the use of violence by sub-state actors or groups within states for political purposes of achieving power, control and legitimacy, by using unorthodox or unconventional approaches to warfare owing to a fundamental weakness in resources or capabilities" (p. 232).

[16] Gen J. N. Mattis, "Memorandum for US Joint Forces Command: Assessment of Effects Based Operations," August 2008. Excerpt: "It is my view that EBO has been misapplied and overextended to the point that it actually hinders rather than helps joint operations….At the same time, we must retain and adopt those aspects of effect based thinking that are useful. We must stress the importance of mission type orders that contain clear Commander's Intent, unambiguous tasks and purpose, and most importantly, links ways and means with achievable ends."

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